Science fiction aesthetics

Article

Accepted Version

Images:
Craig Dodd: Cover Art for J.G Ballard *High Rise*, Jonathan Cape UK (1975)
Carlos Ochagavia: Cover Art for J.G Ballard *High Rise*, Holt. Reinhard & Winston (1978)

"Their real opponent was not the residents in the heights far above them, but the *image* of the building in their own minds, the multiplying layers of concrete that anchored them to the floor."[1]

Throughout JG Ballard's novel *High Rise*, this *image* of the building weighs heavily on its inhabitants. The pressure it exerts warps their social structures and drives them to trivial savagery, while its brutal and dehumanising aspect becomes embedded in their collective psyche. As described by Ballard, "their behaviour only makes sense if you assume they want this apparent descent into barbarism … the environment makes possible the whole set of unfolding logics."[2]

While many science fiction visions of the city explore the potential strangeness which could be extrapolated from the cities of the present day, Ballard reflects this gaze inwards, to reveal the inherent strangeness within our existing built environment and provide an estranging perspective which critiques the cities currently under construction. In doing so, he employs the techniques of cognitive estrangement identified by Darko Suvin, whereby the "mirror is a crucible," [3] reflecting a world made strange.

As described by Jonathan Taylor, this transformation of reality is used to explore human interaction with the built environment which acts as both the "expression and main agent of change in human subjectivity."[4] This subjectivity of perspective is keenly expressed in two of the illustrations which accompanied early editions of the novel, which use surrealist artistic tropes to explore the inhabitant's perception of place, their *image* of the building.[5]

The cover artwork of the first edition of *High Rise*, produced by Craig Dodd, establishes the primacy of the building in the imaginations of its inhabitants by depicting the towers in glorious isolation. Its close cropping cuts out all extraneous influences or hints at urban context, leaving the high-rise and its inhabitants dislocated from the rest of society. This reflects the perception of the residents that the world beyond the high-rise has gradually become irrelevant. For Wilder, one of the residents, life "away from the apartment was almost dreamlike in its unreality… the only real events in his life were those taking place within the high-rise." [6]

This omnipresence is reinforced by the point of perspective, we look up at these buildings from below placing them in a position of visual dominance over the viewer. This conveys the power and control that the building exerts over its inhabitants as the primary agent of social and psychological change. There is a striking absence of signs of inhabitation or signs of human agency, creating the implication that the high-rise is most accurately depicted as a diagram or a technological object. This use of a pencil render drawing style carries with it the impression that this tower is more an architectural ideal than a built reality, an image of a building uncluttered by the lives of those it contains. An impression that is reflected by the inhabitants in the novel, for whom, "part of its

[1] J.G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (London; New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 58. Italics added by author
[2] J.G. Ballard, quoted in Vivian Vale and Andrea Juno, *J.G. Ballard* (San Francisco, Calif.; Enfield: V/Search Publications, 1984), 162.
[3] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Yale University Press, 1979), 5.
[4] Jonathan Taylor, 'The Subjectivity of the near Future: Geographical Imaginings in the Work of J G Ballard', in *Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction*, 2002, 92.
[5] For an examination of the historical and literary context of surrealist or abstract sf art see: Gary Westfahl, 'Artists in Wonderland: Toward a True History of Science Fiction Art', in *Unearthly Visions: Approaches to Science Fiction and Fantasy Art*, ed. Gary Westfahl, George Edgar Slusser, and Kathleen Church Plummer (Greenwood Press, 2002).
[6] Ballard, *High-Rise*, 60.

appeal lay all too clearly in the fact that this was an environment built, not for man, but for man's absence." [7]

The illustrated building itself is reminiscent of Erno Goldfinger's Balfron tower, which has been noted as a possible source of inspiration for Ballard[8]. By drawing on the visual language of modernism with strip windows and exposed structure, and alluding to this particular building, this cover specifically locates the novel as a response to modernist high-rise developments. It also reflects the complexity of critique within the novel, the unresolved conflict between the noble utopian social intent embodied within the high-rise form, and the subsequent popular narrative of dystopian failure apparently evidenced through material and social decay.

But the sense of relative reality established by this a concrete reference to the built is surreally subverted, as the tower appears to have been torn apart with the areas of sky visible through the absent floors. In this wrenching detachment from ground level the image expresses the inhabitant's own radical detachment from life outside the high-rise, literally cutting loose from the social rules which govern life below. The jagged edges of these tears are testament to the violence of this extraction, the breakdown of the structure expressing and enabling the breakdown of the society and the individuals, it contains.

The 1978 illustration by Carlos Ochagavia has a similar visual style, with the psychological dominance of the high-rise made more all the more apparent by the framing of the image within the text. Thus, the abstract idea of the 'high-rise', its expression as an ideal term rather than a real place, controls and constrains our perspective on the world it contains. This notion of control is reinforced by the isolation of the towers within the landscape. In the novel, the towers are surrounded by suburban streets but these are replaced in this illustration by an unending featureless landscape, a haze of ground and sky. This conveys the perception of the inhabitants that the world outside has ceased to exist, what they refer to as "the erosion of the world around the high-rise." [9]

At a glance, the destruction of the foreground tower reiterates this experience of erosion. It appears streaked with smoke, consumed by a flame of brown and gold, reflecting the violence and destruction which consumes its inhabitants. On closer examination, the smoke clears to reveal a rock face complete with cave dwellings, directly depicting the multiple references to the building as a cliff in the novel, "this overpriced cell, slotted almost at random into the cliff face of the apartment building." [10] Here, the edges between formal rationalism and the rough-cast rock face are indistinct, the two forms of dwelling and the two implied states of human development are overlaid and interchangeable. In the High-Rise, the veneer of civilisation can be stripped back to reveal the barbaric tribal self, the cave dweller who lurks beneath.

These depictions of the inhabitant's own perception of the building and redraws the reality of the high-rise in their own terms. In these illustrations, as in many of Ballard's novels, we are offered a glimpse into the "inner-space" of the human psyche[11]. As described by David Pringle, "almost literally, delineating an inner landscape, a terrain of the soul which has been brought into existence by modern technology."[12]

---

[7] Ibid., 25.
[8] See for example: Ed Frith, '"Is It Burning yet?": The Buildings Behind J G Ballard's Writing', *Architects Journal*, April 2009, http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/is-it-burning-yet-the-buildings-behind-j-g-ballards-writing/5200708.fullarticle. and Andrzej Gąsiorek, *J.G. Ballard*, Contemporary British Novelists (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press; Palgrave, 2005), 108.
[9] Ballard, *High-Rise*, 35.
[10] Ibid., 7.
[11] J. G. Ballard, 'Which Way to Inner Space?', in *New Worlds Science Fiction*, ed. John Carnell, vol. 40, 118 (London: Nova Publications Ltd, 1962), 118.
[12] David Pringle, *Earth Is the Alien Planet: J. G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare* (Borgo Press, 1979), 11.

In doing so, these illustrations express the underlying architectural critique of the novel, not of the built reality of high-rise towers themselves as a formal architectural type, but a critique of their perception. An extrapolated and exaggerated warning about the version of humanity which might be unleashed in perceived spaces of radical social isolation and technological detachment. These fears made concrete in a space which physically removes the inhabitants from social and psychological constraint, and "for the first time (it) removed the need to repress every kind of anti-social behaviour, and left them free." [13]

[13] Ballard, *High-Rise*, 36.